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Political Stories: The Individual in Contemporary Fiction

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Political Stories The Individual in Contemporary Fiction

Nathan Oates (bio)

The Emperor's children Claire Messud. Vintage, 2006, 431 pp., \$14.95 (paper)

A Disorder Peculiar to the country Ken Kalfus. Harper Perennial, 2006, 237 pp.,

\$13.95 (paper)

Half of a Yellow Sun Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Knopf, 2006, 433 pp., \$24.95

Delirium Laura Restrepo. Doubleday, 2007, 320 pp., \$23.95

Last evenings on earth Roberto Bolano. New Directions, 2006, 219 pp., \$13.95
(paper)

Since the radical political aesthetics of the '60s, American fiction has generally tended to engage politics warily. Minimalism, perhaps the most influential literary trend of the last twenty-five years, is also on the surface the most apolitical. The best minimalist works are typically less overtly radical than such postmodern texts as Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*, and yet they are in fact political, focusing on the local instead of on the larger social space. The same can be said of the more linguistically exuberant writers that followed the minimalists, such as David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers and Stacey Richter, for their work in the '90s tended to hold politics at an ironic, skeptical remove. There are many good reasons for the wariness with which fiction writers have approached politics: the propaganda, generalizations and distortions of politics are in some ways antithetical to literature, which is made of the particulars of language and the personal predicaments of its characters. As the poet Robert Lowell wrote in a letter to a friend, "You want to write about the nuclear age and end up with your shoestring."

Despite this, many writers in recent years have turned their attention to explicitly political issues and predicaments. Dave Eggers, famous for his playful meta-autobiography *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (with a title that serves as a hallmark for the ironic-minded years of the late '90s) has recently published another "autobiography," *What Is the What*, the partly fictionalized story of a real-life hero and Lost Boy from the Sudan, detailing the horrors and violence he endured. Suggesting something as sweeping as literary movements or trends inevitably requires one to blinker oneself against the diversity and complexity of our literary times: many American writers **[End Page 156]** have engaged directly and powerfully with politics throughout the years I've described as apolitical, most notably Toni Morrison, Don DeLillo and

Tony Kushner. But if we allow ourselves to look for common patterns and connections, the most obvious current trend is a move toward direct engagement with political events and their impact on the state of the individual self. Even the stalwart chronicler of domestic conflicts John Updike has tried his hand at this new trend in his bluntly titled novel *Terrorist*.

Although no single event can account for this heightened artistic interest in politics, it is tempting to suggest that it began for contemporary American writers with 9/11. The immediate artistic response by many writers to the terrorist attacks was a sense of futility and pointlessness: Ian McEwan said he couldn't stand any longer to write about invented people, though he would soon enough return to fiction with *Saturday*, a novel about the buildup to the Iraq war; Martin Amis claimed, "After a couple of hours at their desks on September 12, 2001, all the writers on earth were reluctantly considering a change of occupation," though he would contribute his own efforts to 9/11 literature with the short story "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta," which appeared in the *New Yorker*. Hyperbolic as these claims now seem, the intensity of political events and their intrusion into our domestic lives poses a serious challenge for the literary writer. What relevance can made-up worlds and characters have in a time of war? Who has time for fiction in light of our new, complex relationship to and culpability in war, disenfranchisement and religious fundamentalism? American literature's movements and **[End Page 157]** larger shifts have often coincided with political upheaval—the Civil War and the American Renaissance; World War I and Modernism—and so it is useful in these early post-9/11 years to consider the new literary landscape.

Claire Messud's *The Emperor's...*

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